

Germany: train drivers vote by huge majority for strike action

Ludwig Niethammer
8 August 2007

German train drivers have voted by an overwhelming majority to take unlimited strike action in pursuit of their campaign for higher wages. Some 96 percent of train drivers and conductors who voted in the ballot decided in favour of strike. The overwhelming vote for strike action is even more notable coming as it does in the midst of a concerted campaign against the drivers by business and political circles, as well as sections of the press.

Coinciding with the publication of the results of the strike ballot Monday, German Railways (Deutsche Bahn—DB) boss Hartmut Mehdorn gave an interview to *Der Spiegel* magazine in which he intensified his threats and insults against the train drivers and their union—the GDL (Gewerkschaft Deutscher Lokführer).

Although it is widely acknowledged that the train drivers represent an underpaid layer of workers, Mehdorn declared that their entirely justified wage claim was “crazy” and that the union had “enticed” its members into a campaign to “split railway personnel” in a completely unacceptable manner.

Although Mehdorn is well aware that a host of legal actions by DB against the train drivers have failed to clearly find the strike ballot and any subsequent strike action illegal, he continually referred in the *Spiegel* interview to “illegal” strikes and the “illegal” activities of the train drivers’ union. At the same time, Mehdorn threatened the union with financial sanctions for any action it took. “We will demand compensation payments for all illegal strikes. Should the railways lose millions as the result of illegal actions, then we want to have theses sums replaced.” In addition, he threatened that every train driver who acted “illegally” would be dealt with and suspended from service.

In their vicious attacks and slanders against train drivers, Mehdorn and the DB executive can rely on the unstinting support of the other two main railway workers’ trade unions, Transnet and the GDBA (Gewerkschaft Deutsche Bundesbahnbeamten und Anwärter).

The two unions have backed management to the hilt, both condemning the train drivers’ action and functioning as

strike breakers against the GDL. The rail unions in turn have the support of the German Confederation of Trade Unions (Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund—DGB). From the outset, these trade union bodies have opposed the wage claim demanded by train drivers, although they are well aware of the low wages and miserable working conditions of German railway personnel.

When Mehdorn now provocatively declares in *Der Spiegel*, “We cannot be blackmailed,” he is throwing down the gauntlet to train drivers and other railway personnel, who should reject this blackmail with contempt. In fact, it is the trade unions Transnet and the GDBA that have split railway personnel.

Following the decision by DB to offer a pay increase of 4.5 percent and a single payment of 600 euros to the Transnet and GDBA membership to isolate the train drivers, the two unions insisted on a clause in the contract that prevented DB from making any concessions to the train drivers. In the event of the DB executive concluding a separate deal with the GDL, the contract already agreed with Transnet and the GDBA would be rendered automatically invalid.

Then last week, more details emerged about the collaboration between DB and Transnet aimed at sabotaging the preparations for strike action. Transnet began a campaign collecting signatures for a petition with the slogan, “Not this way, GDL!,” aimed at whipping up sentiment amongst railway workers against the GDL strike ballot and the so-called “crash course of the GDL.”

The head of the DB company works council, Günther Kirchheim (Transnet), went even further. He wrote a letter to the DB head of personnel, Margret Suckale, alleging that GDL members had used violence against other railway workers—without producing a shred of evidence.

As the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ) noted in its weekend edition, “Is this just a preconceived plan between the author of the letter and its recipient, aimed at branding the train drivers’ union GDL as dubious and militant?”

The GDL had issued a leaflet to its members advocating

peaceful conduct in its dispute. The leaflet reads: “Do not attempt to use inappropriate measures to deter access for co-workers who are willing to work.” The *SZ* notes that there are now alternative forms of this leaflet in circulation “in which the word ‘not’ is missing,” and concludes: “It is not hard to see who has an interest in profiting from such defamation.”

Following the failure of the DB executive with the help of Transnet to prevent the ballot on strike action, train drivers now confront a broad array of enemies, in business, in the political establishment and in the union bureaucracies.

In any event, Mehdorn resumed his offensive as soon as the result of the ballot was made known. His reaction to the 96 percent strike vote came promptly. Although the GDL leadership did its best to prevent a conflict, and even offered to participate in further talks with the DB executive until the deadline on Tuesday, Mehdorn turned down the offer and let the period elapse.

The chairman of the GDL, Manfred Schell, had hoped—even after the strike ballot—that he could reach a deal with the DB board. The GDL leadership is incapable of comprehending and adequately preparing its membership in line with the political implications of the dispute.

It is quite the opposite in the case of Mehdorn, his DB board members, the German government and Transnet. They have all set their sights on defeating the train drivers. For these forces, such a defeat would be an important milestone in preparations currently being made for the unpopular privatisation of the railways, planned for this autumn.

Mehdorn has made no secret of the connection. *Der Spiegel* reporters noted the previous close collaboration between management and the union and the importance of that collaboration for the future of the railways, adding, “It is even relevant to your plans to float the company on the stock exchange. Won’t this conflict with the GDL deter possible investors?”

Mehdorn replied, “Nobody is prepared to invest in an enterprise that allows a small group of functionaries to act the fool. In France, the SNCF has approximately a dozen different trade unions—i.e., it is difficult to control. I attach great importance to the fact that we reorganised the company during the past years with a high measure of social compatibility—in a reasonable dialogue with all trade unions. Now, this is unnecessarily being put at risk.”

But there are more fundamental political considerations behind the current concerted campaign to break the train drivers. The aim is to set an example and thereby intimidate other sections of workers from seeking to undertake militant action in defence of jobs and living conditions.

The political elite, which includes the trade union bureaucracy, is determined to prevent increasing social and

political unrest. It took a huge effort by the unions to demobilise the recent strikes by German doctors and telephone workers.

Broad layers of the population reject the antisocial policy of Germany’s ruling grand coalition (Christian Democratic Union, Christian Social Union and the Social Democratic Party) and are opposed to the unceasing stream of attacks on wages and jobs, which have been inevitably backed by the trade unions. The train drivers speak for many workers in their anger and determination to resist such attacks. To take this forward, workers must break from the paralysing grip of the trade unions.

For its part, the GDL bureaucracy is completely unprepared for such a development. GDL chief Schell, who receives his pension next year, is resolved to conduct the dispute as a completely “normal wage conflict.” The days, however, when trade unions could impose their demands with threats of militancy and “pinpoint strikes” are long past. The drawn-out strikes by doctors and Telekom workers once again confirmed that it is impossible to combat the current spate of attacks on political and social gains on the basis of trade union policy.

Militant train drivers have been politically disarmed in their dispute by the complete failure of the GDL leadership to raise the issue of privatisation and identify the strike-breaking role of Transnet and the DGB.

To be able to conduct the strike successfully, it is absolutely vital to place the filthy tactics of Transnet and the DGB at the heart of the dispute. Train drivers should approach other rail workers and mobilise with them against the strike-breaking role of Transnet boss Hansen and his friends. They must conduct their strike on behalf of all railway workers in a common struggle against the privatisation plans of the DB board, which is backed by Transport Minister Wolfgang Tiefensee (SPD).

The strike must be made the starting point for a break with the opportunist policy of social partnership—i.e., the close collaboration of management and the trade unions. The strikers and workers in industries in Germany, Europe and throughout the world must take up a socialist perspective, which places the needs of the population above the profit interests of big business.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact